

Sports

High school referees also eager to get back to action

By Corey Kirk

ckirk@bakercityherald.com

Student-athletes aren't alone in wanting to get back to competition after seven months of restrictions due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Referees have also missed the excitement of a competitive atmosphere.

"The high schools are telling us that they don't have any games planned (for the fall), but they want us to be prepared, said Brandon Torres of Baker City, who referees high school soccer matches. "It's difficult to be prepared when you plan out your life."

When the pandemic started in March, basketball teams, including Baker's defending state champion girls squad, were preparing for state tournaments.

The cancellation of most tournaments was a shock, said Jack Foliard, executive director of the Oregon Athletics Officials Association.

"And in the spring, sports like softball and baseball were wiped out," Foliard said.

Torres, who has been a soccer referee for 13 years, immediately felt the effect of the pandemic.

He has refereed high school games for the Oregon School Activities Association, U.S. Soccer (club play) and for younger players.

Torres also likes to play the sport.

"The only sport I really enjoy is soccer; there is a big group of adults that also play, and we couldn't do that either," Torres said. "Not being able to referee in the spring for Eastern Oregon soccer league in Union County and not being able to play at the same time, was a big problem."

In Oregon, referees and officials are labeled as independent contractors. How they end up getting compensated



Kathy Orr / Baker City Herald, File

A referee (in yellow shirt) watches an October 2019 soccer match as Baker's Brooklyn Jaca, No. 5, and Maya Smith, No. 6, play against La Grande.

depends on the sport, and what level they are officiating. They are paid by the schools, Foliard said.

"The schools pay a set fee per official, per game," Foliard said. "It's a little bit different in each sport, and it is slightly different if it is a 6A school or a 1A school."

With high school sports potentially resuming in Oregon in January, Foliard has been busy working on plans to keep referees, players and coaches safe.

"We are talking about depending on the sport whether officials will be wearing masks like that we've seen sometimes on TV," Foliard said. "The other issue we are trying to deal with are those sports that require whistles, we are trying to figure out whether that could be done with a regular whistle or an alternative type whistle."

Referees for the National Football League have been

using electronic whistles, which don't require that they remove their face masks.

Torres said he understands the precautions, but he isn't overly worried.

"I'm not one of those alarmist people where I think it should run our lives," Torres said. "If I get it I will stay away from people and get better."

The effects of the pandemic could exacerbate a problem that has plagued high school athletics for several years, Foliard said: a shortage of referees.

"The numbers have been decreasing for several years, if we lose a lot of officials because of COVID we are going to be in more difficulty getting the games covered," Foliard said. "We need people to sign up to be an official more so now than ever."

Torres encourages people interested in officiating to

study the sports.

He said he tried to get into refereeing right after high school but stopped soon after, only returning to it years later.

"I had thought because I was a player and I had been playing since I was two years old I knew the rules," Torres said. "If you are interested, go ahead and pass the test, obviously study the rule book first. Get with a group of referees that are willing to mentor you as an assistant referee."

The future of high school sports depends on whether students return to in-person classes, at least on some days.

The Baker School District has no timeline for when Baker High School students could resume in-person classes, even on a hybrid basis, with students attending classes at the school on two days per week.

If BHS does start in-person classes, athletes could start practicing Dec. 28 for the winter sports — basketball, wrestling and swimming.

The schedule for the usual fall sports — football, volleyball, soccer and cross-country — would start with practices Feb. 22, and traditional spring sports would start April 19.

Torres said he's ready to return to the soccer pitch.

"I would be back to my normal routine immediately if that was an option," Torres said.

Those interested in officiating can learn more at www.newofficials.org



Robert Gauthier / Los Angeles Times-TNS

Los Angeles Chargers quarterback Justin Herbert is hit by Kansas City Chiefs defensive end Michael Danna (51) as he scores a touchdown on Sept. 20 at SoFi Stadium in Inglewood, California.

Herbert named Chargers' starter

By Joe Reedy

AP Sports Writer

LOS ANGELES — Anthony Lynn has taken the temporary starter tag off quarterback Justin Herbert.

The Los Angeles Chargers coach on Thursday named Herbert the starter for the rest of the season, beginning with Monday night's game at New Orleans.

"He has impressed me from the very beginning. I think he's shown the consistency that you look for, especially in a rookie quarterback," Lynn said. "He's made some pretty nice throws and some great plays. So I think this young man is just going to continue to get better."

Tyrod Taylor was the starter going into the season and directed the Chargers to a Week 1 win over Cincinnati. But the 10-year veteran suffered a rib injury during the game and then suffered a punctured lung while receiving a pain-killing injection before LA's Sept. 20 game against Kansas City. Taylor was taken to the hospital and Herbert found out he was getting his first NFL start less than a minute before kickoff.

Lynn said after that game — a 23-20 overtime loss to the Chiefs during which Herbert became the ninth QB since the merger to throw for 300 yards in his first start — that Taylor would return under center when he was "100%." Herbert's play changed Lynn's mind.

With Taylor returning to practice this week, Lynn said he made the decision Tuesday and informed both players.

"Tyrod is a veteran quarterback with a winning record in this league. I thought it would have been ideal for us to play this year with him as a starter and Justin to watch and learn, similar to what Patrick Mahomes did in Kansas City. But it didn't work out that way," Lynn said. "He got thrown into fire. And I thought he handled the situation well, and I want to see more of him. And it's not going to be a situation where he's looking over his shoulder."

Russell Wilson making his case as the NFL's top player

Seattle Seahawks quarterback Russell Wilson has accomplished nearly everything a starting quarterback can. He immediately secured the starting role for the organization that drafted him in the third round in 2012. He's been a Pro Bowl pick every year except 2016. In 2014 and 2015 Wilson led the Seahawks to the Super Bowl, including their first championship.

But one thing has eluded Wilson: the Most Valuable Player award.

He hasn't even been in the conversation, never having received a single MVP vote.

Not even in 2019, when Wilson completed 66.1% of his passes with 30 touchdowns and just five interceptions. He was named to the Pro Bowl again, but Baltimore quarterback Lamar Jackson won the MVP award.

How is it possible that Wilson hasn't gotten a single MVP vote during his eight seasons?

Obviously he doesn't get enough credit for the model of consistency he has been in the Emerald City. Besides racking up the seven Pro Bowls, he has led his team to the playoffs every season except 2017. Although at 5-foot-11 Wilson is 3 inches shorter than the average



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NFL quarterback, the disadvantage doesn't phase him. Whether it is with his arm or his legs, Wilson is as reliable an offensive threat as there is in the NFL.

And now finally, in his ninth season, Wilson has placed himself as a frontrunner in the MVP race.

After four games, Wilson has completed 75.2% of his passes for 16 touchdowns and just two interceptions. He is the top five for passing yards (1,285), quarterback rating (83.4) and overall rating (136.7). The stats speak for themselves — he is having one heck of a start.

Still, Wilson will need to continue to post stellar numbers if he is to outpace challengers such as Jackson and Kansas City quarterback Patrick Mahomes. Both benefit from having taken the league by storm recently, whereas Wilson's excellence is marked more by its consistency.

It's early in the season, of course — maybe too early to be talking about handing out trophies.

But the unbeaten Seahawks are one of the teams to watch in the NFL, and Wilson is the unquestioned leader.

EOU football could start in February

HELENA, Mont. (AP) — The Frontier Conference has approved a conference-only football schedule with games beginning in late February, the league announced.

Each of the league's eight teams, including Eastern Oregon University, are scheduled to play the other teams once during a seven-week

season that starts on Feb. 27 and ends on April 10. There will be no nonconference games. Game dates may be changed as recommended by the schools and local health officials, the conference said Wednesday.

The NAIA football playoffs are scheduled to begin on April 17 and the national

championship is currently set for May 10 in Grambling, Louisiana.

The Frontier Conference football teams are: Carroll College, College of Idaho, Eastern Oregon, Montana Tech, Montana Western, Montana State-Northern, Rocky Mountain and Southern Oregon.

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